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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MISHA'S CEC PICKS -- AN UNIMPRESSIVE
START TO ELECTION SEASON

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES a. i. KENT LOGSDON REASONS: 1.4 (B) A
ND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: As required by law, President Saakashvili has chosen three candidates to fill the job of Chairman of the Central Election Commission from a list of 14 presented to him by an NGO advisory group. Saakashvili's picks included outgoing CEC Chairman Levan Tarknishvili, Zurab Kharatishvili, a current member of the GPB board, and Otar Sichinava, a member of the Constitutional Court. All three candidates are viewed as pro-government and pro-UNM and their choice was widely criticized by the opposition. Three opposition parties with a vote on the CEC -- Republicans, Conservatives and Labor -- have announced that they will abstain from voting. The three other opposition parties represented on the CEC -- CDM, We Ourselves, and Industrialists -- have stated that they would not vote for Tarknishvili and were considering the other two largely unknown candidates. Procedurally, if none of the candidates receives three votes, the decision will pass to Parliament by January 15 -- an increasingly likely outcome. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Opposition leaders shrugged off Saakashvili's choice as predictable and downplayed the importance of Saakashvili's decision other than the obvious perception problem of his picks. The re-nomination of Levan Tarknishvili was especially cynical considering that UNM leaders have showed little to no support for his reelection and his resignation was offered up by the government as a result of last spring's political protests. In the end, Saakashvili exercised his legitimate right according to an agreed upon process, but, nevertheless, one has to question whether winning a minor tactical political battle is worth the increasingly negative perception that resulted both inside and outside of Georgia, especially considering the apparent strong electoral position of UNM heading into local elections. Post will continue to seek opportunities to stress that following the letter of the law and conceding only the minimum will continue to foster negative perceptions of GoG progress on its democratic reform efforts. End Comment.

Why Tarknishvili?

¶3. (C) CDM leader Giorgi Targamadze and Vice Speaker Levan Vepkhadze (CDM) told Poloff that the nomination of Tarknishvili was "ridiculous". Targamadze noted that Tarknishvili's nomination was a type of blackmail to make the opposition choose between two candidates that were acceptable to Saakashvili. Because the threshold to become chairman is simply three votes out of six among opposition CEC members (or a majority), making the choice effectively binary increased the odds that a chairman would be chosen by the opposition. Targamadze explained that Saakashvili did this so he could claim the opposition chose either Kharatishvili or Sichinava and have at least a facade of political cover. Vepkhadze said under no circumstances would any opposition member, nor would most of his colleagues in the parliamentary

majority, support Tarknishvili, whose reputation has not recovered from his chairmanship of the CEC during the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections.

Nobody Knows These Guys

14. (C) Targamadze and Vepkhadze both said they knew little about presumptive candidates Kharatishvili and Sichinava. According to Targamadze, Sichinava has a solid reputation as a constitutional judge and has been willing to show some independence in decisions against the GoG but knew little more about him. Kharatishvili is an accountant who is a member of the Georgian Public Broadcaster board and previously monitored campaign spending under the CEC umbrella. Neither Targamadze nor Vepkhadze knew much about Kharatishvili other than his resume. Alex Petriashvili (Our Georgia - Free Democrats) also knew little about the Kharatishvili and Sichinava. According to Targamadze and Vepkhadze, UNM parliamentarians were undecided about the candidates, lacking any solid opinion on either.

Who Cares - Let's Make the Best of It

15. (C) Petriashvili told Poloff that the Alliance was not focused on the CEC chairmanship as it viewed the issue as more of a sideshow than one of major electoral importance. Petriashvili commented that he thought the choices actually would draw increasing skepticism as to Saakashvili's willingness to hold free and fair elections and follow through with his pledge for more democratic reform. Petriashvili noted, that if presumptive candidate Gigi Ugulava was as strong as his polls seem to indicate, it

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matters little who is the CEC chair. Petriashvili noted that Saakashvili appears to have missed a chance to appoint candidates favorable to the opposition who could have been well received among international observers and local observers alike and offered little electoral downside. Targamadze said it was naive of anybody to think that Saakashvili would not choose candidate that he believed would represent his political interests as any ruling party would. Nonetheless, Targamadze agreed that Saakashvili's credibility on elections and willingness to engage in dialogue took another hit with his most recent picks.

16. (C) Vepkhadze told Poloff that CDM seeks to turn the tables on Saakashvili and intends to make a list of proposals and pledge support to any candidate who agrees to them. The proposals include making the deputy chairman and secretary of the CEC opposition representatives; installing security cameras in all voting precincts; and assuring opposition parity on district election committees. Vepkhadze expressed his disappointment to Poloff that other opposition parties were lukewarm to the idea, preferring to publicize the negative political perception angle and abstaining rather than trying for concrete concessions.

What Happens Next

17. (C) If the six opposition members do not agree on a candidate among the three on January 14, which appears an almost certainty, Parliament will vote for the next chairperson. The Republicans, Labor and Conservatives have already said they would not vote. Vepkhadze said it was unlikely that CDM, Industrialists, and We Ourselves could agree on a single candidate and CDM would not vote for any candidate who does not agree to its concessions. As a result, Parliament will likely decide the issue. Both Targamadze and Vepkhadze said there was no uniformity among UNM parliamentarians who had been completely kept out of the loop on the decision making process. Neither Targamadze nor Vepkhadze expected Tarknishvili to have much of a chance to be re-elected.

Siradze Doesn't Make the Cut - Is Thrilled

18. (C) As expected, ISFED chairperson, Eka Siradze did not make the cut for the final three candidates despite having the most civil society support. Siradze told Poloff before Saakashvili's announcement that, despite the fact she had 27 NGOs behind her nomination, she was not optimistic that she would be chosen. After the announcement, Siradze told Poloff not only was she not surprised that she was not chosen, she was actually relieved -- even "thrilled", as she did not want the position. According to Siradze, she agreed to be nominated to see if Saakashvili would select a candidate heavily endorsed by civil society. Siradze went on to say that the politically strategic choice for Saakashvili would have been to support her as a candidate, and show that he was willing to select a civil society endorsed candidate acceptable to the opposition. Siradze said that even as CEC chairperson, she would have limited ability to affect elections or ferret out fraud. Selecting her would make Saakashvili come off as politically reasonable without damaging UNM's election prospects. Siradze expressed frustration that Saakashvili continued to ignore civil society when it did not suit his interests, but counted it as a small victory that Saakashvili held the NGO meeting and played by the rules despite missing the initial deadline for selecting the candidates (requiring the law to be amended to change the deadline).

LOGSDON